

**Public health column for IR
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A Healthy Way to Show Your Love: Be Free of STDs

Spring is only a few days away, and our thoughts at Lewis and Clark Public Health have turned to... sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

We don't mean to be a wet blanket, but we've been studying the latest local disease statistics, and we've noticed a troubling trend: the number of Lewis and Clark County residents with STDs has been climbing for the past several years.

We're not alone. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported last fall that STDs have reached an all-time high nationwide. The largest increases were reported in syphilis (up 19 percent in 2015), gonorrhea (13 percent), and chlamydia (6 percent). People aged 15-24 and gay and bisexual men were hit the hardest.

Chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis are the three most commonly reported diseases in the nation, according to the CDC. They put people at risk for severe and often irreversible health consequences, including infertility, chronic pain, and increased risk for HIV.

They also cost the U.S. health-care system almost \$16 billion a year, the CDC estimates.

All three diseases are caused by bacteria and are highly contagious, but they're also treatable and preventable. More diligent screening can help reduce their spread.

Stopping STDs

Experts say it's difficult to pin down one specific reason for the increase in STDs.

Some suggest that fear of HIV/AIDS encouraged people to be more vigilant and willing to get tested. More testing uncovered more cases of all STDs. Medical providers also may have become more consistent about reporting cases.

Whatever the cause, it makes sense to nip this trend in the proverbial bud by doing all we can to prevent STD infections in the first place.

The surest way to avoid getting any STD is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a long-term relationship with one uninfected person. Using latex condoms correctly and consistently also reduces risk.

If you're sexually active, we recommend that you talk to your medical provider about whether STD testing is right for you. If you think you might have symptoms, stop having sex and see your medical provider right away.

Chlamydia and Gonorrhea

Chlamydia and gonorrhea are very common, especially among teenagers and young adults. About 1.5 million cases of chlamydia and 400,000 of gonorrhea occurred nationwide in 2015. No doubt many cases were never reported because the infected person didn't notice any symptoms.

When symptoms do occur, they include unusual sores, rashes, bleeding, and discharges, as well as a need to urinate frequently and a burning feeling while going. Men may feel tenderness, swelling, or pain in their testicles.

The bacteria that cause chlamydia and gonorrhea are transmitted through all types of sexual contact. They also can spread from an untreated mother to her baby during childbirth, raising the specter of stillbirth and birth defects. Infections in women can lead to chronic pelvic pain, pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy, and infertility.

The CDC recommends that all sexually active women younger than 25 get screened for STDs once a year. The same advice applies to older women who have new or multiple partners or a partner who is infected. Pregnant women should be screened during their first prenatal care visit.

In most cases, chlamydia and gonorrhea can be detected with a urine test. They can be cured with antibiotics, but health officials are increasingly worried that the bacteria are becoming resistant to current treatments.

Syphilis

Only one case of syphilis has been reported in the county since 2013. But there was a sharp jump in cases statewide in 2015. Twenty-two cases were reported, compared to 10 or fewer in each of the previous 15 years, according to the Montana health department.

Syphilis is passed from person to person through all types of sexual activity that cause direct contact with a syphilitic sore. These sores, called chancres, are usually firm, round, and painless. Pregnant women can transmit an infection to their unborn child.

Syphilis has been called "The Great Pretender," because its symptoms can look like many other diseases. It usually follows a progression of stages that can last for weeks, months, or even years. It starts with sores, which heal regardless of whether a person gets treatment. But without treatment, the disease advances to a secondary stage: a rash on one or more parts of the body.

During the next "latent" stage, a person has no visible signs or symptoms. But without treatment, the bacteria continue to live in the body. In rare cases, the disease progresses to another stage, which can be fatal. It can appear 10-30 years after the original infection.

You should be tested for syphilis if you:

- Have unusual sores or rashes;
- Have a sexual partner who was recently diagnosed with syphilis;
- Are pregnant;
- Are a man who is sexually active with other men; or
- Are living with HIV and are sexually active.

Penicillin shots are used to treat syphilis.

“Be Very Proactive”

Ultimately, the CDC argues, the best way to respond to this STD epidemic is to expand access to screening and treatment. We agree, but we also urge individuals to take advantage of the screening and treatment options that already exist.

As an infectious disease physician in Pittsburgh put it, “In a way, STDs are easy to prevent because the behavior modification doesn’t cost that much money, but it does require people to be very proactive.”

Lewis and Clark Public Health offers testing and treatment for chlamydia and gonorrhea. Call 457-8900 to learn more.

Other good sources of information are your doctor or the CDC website, www.cdc.gov/std/.